



AUTHORITY IN THE BIBLE

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"It shall not be so among you": these words from the Gospel have been chosen aptly as the theme of this Assembly which wishes to reflect on "the service of authority." These are the words uttered by Jesus after the request by the mother of Zebedee's children to sit on his right and on his left. Turning to the other apostles, outraged by that request, Jesus says:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt 20:25-28).

The exercise of power, instead of promoting growth and contributing to the common good, often turns into harassment, displays of superiority, and a desire to dominate

and oppress which reduces the other to servitude, humiliating him, diminishing and violating the other. But among the disciples of Jesus it cannot be so, and in communities wishing to follow his way there is no place for power, but only for that exercise of authority which makes itself into a loving service, a placing of one's entire self at others' disposal, to the extent of giving one's life for those – entrusted by God – to whom one must serve as an example and guide on the arduous road to sanctity.

Sacred Scripture offers us many authority figures to whom we may refer in reflecting on this issue. I will limit myself in the elaboration of this argument by focusing on two points: first, in considering briefly Deuteronomy's description of the ideal figure of a king, the authority *par excellence* in ancient Israel, and then pausing longer on a paradigmatic character, Queen Esther, who fulfils her royal status in offering to give her life for her people. Thus we will reflect first on a text of the Law, the Torah, which indicates a path of wisdom, and then on a story, particularly rich in elements that are pertinent to our theme, showing how one might live according to the path of wisdom indicated by the Torah.

1. The ideal king: an authority without power

In Dt 17:14-20 the Law outlines the figure of the ideal king desired by Israel and given by the Lord, a king who should not, with his power, rival the kingship of God, but rather serves to mediate the presence of the divine in the midst of his people. The text reads:

"When you come to the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me'; you may indeed set as king over you him whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not multiply horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again.' And he shall not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply for himself silver and gold. "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in the charge of the Levitical priests; and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them; that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left; so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

Chosen by God, and standing in a special relationship of dependence on Him, the king must live by faith according to the criteria of the Lord, in the awareness of being the subject of a special predilection, an election that does not flow from his abilities and personal initiative but only as a consequence of the free gift of God's mercy.

His heart then, as the text says, must not exalt itself (cf. v. 20) and its exercise of

authority should not be marked by power as is the case with the kings of the "nations that are round about" (v. 14): a brother, part of the people and standing in solidarity with it, he must exercise his function as a service to those who are his brothers, giving up the use and display of power's usual forms. For this reason, he must have few horses, which were used for war and here symbolize military power; few wives, who often served as a means of forging alliances with other peoples and were thus instruments of political power as well as representing the danger of Israel's absorbing ideologies and pagan religions; and, finally, little silver and gold, which is to say moderation in economic power.

The typical power traits are thus subjected to challenge, so as to indicate instead the true way which one must pursue in seeking to exercise authority properly: every day reading the Law, the Word of God, and conforming to it, in an attitude of dependence and obedience which makes of the king a servant of the Lord. In this way he will be able to serve the people entrusted to his care. Authority can require obedience only if it lives in obedience.

A typical figure of this king "after the heart of God" (cf. 1 Sam 13:14) is David, the youngest son of Jesse, the small one chosen by the Lord out of all his brothers, removed from his job as pastor of his father's flock so as to become the "Shepherd of Israel" (cf. 2 Sam 5:1-2, Ps 78:70-2). David is the shepherd-king who, as opposed to the figure of the warrior-king Saul, faces the gigantic Goliath while refusing the powerful weapons offered him by Saul; instead he makes use of a sling and some pebbles taken from a stream, the weak weapons of the shepherd who goes to meet a formidable enemy with the serene confidence that arises from faith in the Lord (cf. 1 Samuel 17).

In the episode of the duel with the Philistine, two different ways of being royal are compared, but Saul's strong kingship, marked by abuse, must give way to that of the shepherd-king who is ready to sacrifice his life for his people, not relying on the force of arms but in the saving presence of God. This constitutes true kingship, and so a true exercise of authority that becomes service and gift, bringing life to the brethren.

All this opens us to our second point, the figure of Esther, the weak and helpless queen who shows herself in all her royal might when he decides to risk her life for the salvation of her people.

2. Queen Esther and the strength of weakness

The book of Esther, written in Hebrew, but with many additions in Greek, is a story of a legendary nature which is presented in connection with the feast of Purim, offering an explanation of its origin. Focusing on the experience of liberation that God works for his people by freeing them from mortal danger, its protagonist is a young Jewish woman, Esther, who has some features in common with the great figure of Moses, who also served as a means of salvation for Israel. It is a tale that teaches how

authority must be lived, doing this by showing, negatively, the wrong use of power as bringer of death, and, positively, the "right" use that promotes and aids life.

I would like to trace now the history of this book, highlighting some of the most significant aspects and offering some interpretative keys. We will make reference along the way to both the Greek and Hebrew texts.

The Hebrew text begins with a description of a great banquet given by King Ahasuerus to all his princes and ministers. The power and wealth of the Persian king are made manifest in this feast and its opulence: it is an occasion of self-celebration, typical of worldly kingship, which lasts a full 180 days, followed by another 7 days for the whole populace. Meanwhile Vashti, his queen and wife, offers a banquet for the women. But when Ahasuerus, desiring to show his guests the beauty of his bride, sends for her that she might be exhibited, she refuses to come.

The king's wrath is great, and consulting his advisers, resolves to depose her: Vashti has disobeyed his orders in not coming into his presence, and so will never do so. Another shall become queen.

Thus begins the search for a new bride for King Ahasuerus. There appears on the scene Mordecai, whose relative Esther was brought up by him as his adopted daughter because she was an orphan. Endowed with great beauty, she is chosen along with other girls to be presented to the king. And it is with her that Ahasuerus falls in love: now Esther becomes the new queen, and in her honor there will be a great feast for 7 days.

Esther goes to court with an attitude of submission: she subjects herself to exhausting preparations with ointments and perfumes, lasting 12 months, before being presented to the king, obeying all that had been requested of her. But in reality, even with such docility, she will be the one to alter the fate of her people.

It is interesting to examine these different types: Esther, the submissive, and Vashti, the rebel. The latter commits a revolutionary act, which calls into question power and, in refusing to let herself be exhibited, arouses our sympathies. Nonetheless, we cannot read this action in the light of modern or feminist categories. That which Vashti does is presented in the text negatively, as a subversion of the order established by law, even if I think we can see a certain irony in the story: a woman creating turmoil in an empire as gigantic and powerful as that of Persia. Something similar is found in the Exodus account of the midwives in Egypt who refuse to obey Pharaoh's command, generating difficulties for him with their insurmountable objections: they cannot kill the babies at birth, because by the time they arrive the babies have already been born owing to the great vitality of Jewish women, who are claimed to give birth faster than Egyptians. The mighty Pharaoh, who knows nothing of pregnancy and childbirth, must trust their claims and cancel his order, replacing it with another (cf. Ex 1.15-22).

Vashti does, in any case, play a pivotal role in the story, allowing, by her

disobedience, for the introduction of Esther. Something similar happens with the figure of Mordecai, whose refusal to kneel before Haman, the highest dignitary of the court, will cause the plot to develop towards the risk of extermination. But whereas Mordecai's refusal flows from obedience to God, Vashti's is a matter of self-assertion.

This opens us to the positivity of Esther, who never displays a spirit of self-assertion, but will be guided instead by a sense of responsibility towards her people; it is this that will be cause for salvation. Esther seems to allow herself to be swallowed up by the system, but in reality she will cause it to burst. This is because the real subversion consists in obedience to God's plan and in being willing to pursue love even to its extreme consequences. It is in this obedience that Esther was "prepared" for her role as queen, holding this honor in silence.

The story of Esther's admission to the court insists that she was silent with regard to her Jewish origins (cf. 2:10-20); this makes possible the story's successive events. The reader, in fact, knows what the king and Haman do not; evil is unaware of the truth, and the latter, in revealing itself, triumphs. But the silence of Esther has another narrative value: in a situation of apparent objectification of the body, in which the protagonist allows herself to be anointed and perfumed for a whole year as a matter of docility, Esther safeguards her identity and, in hiding it from foreigners, manages in a sense to avoid giving herself totally into their hands. She remains a Jew, faithful to her history and the people to which she belongs. It will be just for the sake of her people, when necessary, that she will be ready even to sacrifice herself.

After a brief insertion of the episode of a plot against the king foiled by Mordecai (cf. 2:21-3), Haman and his inordinate thirst for power are described: everyone had to kneel down and worship before him, but Mordecai refuses. This is not out of pride; as he affirms in his prayer to the Lord, it is so as "not to put the glory of a man above the glory of God" (cf. 4:17*d-e*).

Haman, discovering that Mordecai is Jewish, decides to take revenge on the entire Jewish people (cf. 3:5-6). This is the perverse dynamic of power, manifesting an absolute disproportion between the supposed offense and the reaction provoked: the decision is taken to cause an entire people to perish because one of them would not kneel.

This is the mystery of a people that possesses not only an ethnic unity but also a profound identity and internal cohesion that is based on the election of God, and where belonging and solidarity among the members are lived to the highest degree. But it is also the mystery of the dynamism of evil and salvation. One is reminded of the words of Paul to the Romans: "if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many" (Rom 5:15); but in the book of Esther the ruin is not on account of a sin, but as a result of a gesture of loyalty to God, the same loyalty which will then save those who had been sentenced to death. We find ourselves confronting the

problem of the just one who suffers; Mordecai, on account of just act, must suffer persecution – and with him the whole of his people.

As a result of Haman's wrangling and false accusations before the king, a decree of extermination is issued, the date being decided by casting lots (Purim: cf. 3:7). King Ahasuerus entrusts the execution of the massacre to Haman himself. Among the charges one finds emphasized the otherness of Israel, portrayed as a danger: Israel is a people whose laws are different from those of others, and which does not keep the edicts of the king. The law of God gives different references, criteria that seem subversive; the system of values changes, and this undermines normal living: " There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them," says Haman to his sovereign (3:8) and this is strongly reaffirmed in the edict of extermination (see 3:13*d-g*). Fidelity to God makes people different, foreign, and, as in this case, subject to elimination.

The reaction of Mordecai and his people is immediate and appropriate to the dramatic situation: clothes torn, sackcloth and ashes, fasting, weeping. They are painful gestures of mourning, with which death is anticipated in life, expressing anguish and pleading with God for liberation from such a tragedy. Israel seems doomed to disappear forever, destined for destruction because of her faithfulness to God. It is not unusual to find in Scripture that belonging to God and receiving his blessing become cause of persecution and death, as in Egypt at the time of the Exodus: the people became numerous, in accordance with the promise made to Abraham, and the blessing of the Lord makes itself visible, but being perceived by others as dangerous, itself generates persecution and a will to annihilation.

The news of the misfortune that has befallen Israel comes to reach even Esther, to whom Mordecai sends a desperate plea for help, asking her to come to the king to intercede for her people: "Remembering the days of your lowliness, when you were cared for by me, because Haman, who is next to the king, spoke against us for our destruction. Beseech the Lord and speak to the king concerning us and deliver us from death" (4:8).

Esther is confronted by a seemingly insurmountable difficulty: no one can enter the presence of the king unless called, the penalty being death. But Mordecai's response confronts his adopted daughter with truth: "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:13-14). These are words of suffering, seemingly harsh, but in reality an expression of love. Because love does not manifest itself in a desire for protection which encourages a selfish or cowardly and defeatist attitude; love, even of those who have leadership responsibilities towards others, should help to love, even at risk of life, if needs be.

The way of salvation passes through solidarity, and Esther accepts the words of Mordecai and agrees to perish. She no longer thinks of danger, she no longer seeks to save herself, the salvation of her people is now a priority: "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (4:16).

What is happening in the life of Esther is a conscious acceptance of her history and her identity as the way to discovering her vocation. Esther's belonging to the Jewish people marks out her destiny: the assumption of the reality of the body, of its concreteness, of one's personal history are integral parts of the history of salvation. And now that Israel has reached the moment of peril, Esther regains her own past, a true queen (not of the Persians, but of Israel), and courageously accepting death so that her people can continue to live.

Esther becomes an adult, and expresses her maturity in becoming responsible for the others. She reaches her full personal dimension in this assumption of responsibility, which is both out of obedience to, and in reconciliation with, her own truth. That she is a Jew and is queen of Persia – the two come together to bring about fulfillment in the gift of life, in an authority which is both service and mediation of salvation.

Even for Moses, the authoritative guide of Israel in its founding moment, things were like this: he was divided between the two peoples, the son of a Jewish mother and raised by an Egyptian mother, possessing and enduring a secret identity, in a situation of extermination. Both Moses and Esther at the court of the Gentiles, and absorbed by Gentiles in positions of power. And while there, called to recognize their actual origins. They find themselves confronted by violence (Esther knows the extermination desired by Haman, and Moses witnesses the cruelty mistreatment of a Jew by an Egyptian), but Moses reacts with violence and kills the Egyptian, whereas Esther instead accepts the possibility of death. Both are afraid (Moses flees, Esther faints before the king), and in front of the prospect of facing the dangerous sovereign, even Moses, like Esther, objected, but he too then agrees to go, assuming exposure to death as part of the road of obedience to God. Both are equipped with a beauty that promotes life: Moses is beautiful, and so the mother does not allow him to perish, and Esther is beautiful, and as a consequence Ahasuerus does not sentence her to death. Finally, in both cases, a mystery of fertility and maternity is unfolded: Moses, the little one sentenced to death, taken up by Pharaoh's daughter thus making herself his mother (she who had no milk with which to feed a baby), and Esther, who will become in a real sense the mother of the people (witness true royalty) when she is willing to die for them.

In the Greek text, before Esther presents herself before the king, we are given the prayers of Mordecai and his adopted daughter (cf. 4:17a-z): facing death, they turn to the God of life imploring that they be saved. This is not to say that he abdicates his own initiative and declines to make use of the available resources (Esther is still the queen, which puts her in a position of privilege which might be very useful), but always action is undertaken in the certainty that only God can come in and effect

liberation, even if through mediation. It is the difficult balance between personal efforts and abandonment to the Lord, a continuous test for every believer. And prayer is the synthesis: man is in play and motivates himself, asking all the while that it be God to advance God's plan of salvation.

In the prayer of Esther there is a great deal of anguish, and marked gestures of penance and mourning: she takes off her regalia and takes upon herself the signs of impending death. Esther gets ready to perish, but asks to be freed; the request for help is pathetic and urgent, emphasizing her mortal danger and solitude. The Queen confesses her weakness and her own helplessness; God has to be moved to pity and intervene.

She reminds the Lord his reality as the faithful God who chose Israel, and so cannot allow that "the mouths should be closed who praise Him." Esther therefore asks God to save; she is going into the lair of the "lion" and repeats that she is alone, and that only God can help. Loneliness often accompanies the service of authority, but those who are called know that the Lord does not abandon.

And then Esther reminds God of her own faithfulness: she has not contaminated herself, she has only suffered, despising it, her status as queen among the Gentiles. She remained faithful to the divine decision and the diversity it entailed. And now she asks the Lord to manifest Himself for what He is: the God of Abraham, who liberates and saves.

In prayer, even in anguish, there is present and unshaken an awareness and confidence of being heard by God. Esther has God alone, and God cannot abandon her. With this force alone, that of faith, Esther goes to meet her fate.

When our protagonist presents herself before the king, she does so displaying all her beauty but also her weakness. Esther is afraid of the reaction of the powerful and angry sovereign; excitement and fear for her very life are the forces that have the upper hand. Her strength weakened, she faints. But God, as the Greek text tells us, "changed the spirit of the king to gentleness," which immediately calms his anger, and out of concern for the health of his wife he assures her that she will not suffer consequences for her actions and will not die (cf. 5:1a-f).

In Esther who, though beset by fear, is ready to lay down his life for her people, there is manifested the meaning of true kingship: intercession and a taking upon oneself of the pain of others is are shown to be essential components of real authority. Esther risks her life because she has taken upon herself the suffering of the people to which she belongs and for which she feels responsible. The exercise of power is a service brought "to the end" (cf. Jn 13:1).

Even in this, as we mentioned before, the figure of Esther can be compared to that of Moses, who also agree to present himself before Pharaoh and in so doing ran the risk

of dying. Doing this he became the leader and guide of Israel, a privileged mediation in the relationship with God.

As for Esther, she faints again (see 5:2*a-b*); she is queen, but she is crushed by the weight that she must carry, and shows it in her "becoming less". Weakness need not be a source of fear, and even those who have authority should not be afraid to admit it. This time it is Ahasuerus, yet more upset before his fainted bride, who offers to give her whatever she wants, even half of his kingdom.

But Esther's demand is infinitely more modest: she asks only that the king, together with Haman, take part in a banquet. Then, during the banquet, when Ahasuerus reiterates the proposal to give her everything she wants, she still requires another banquet the next day, with the king and Haman. The reader, at this point, is puzzled: what is Esther waiting for? Why not openly address the problem? Is she delaying the moment of her real demand because she is afraid to reveal herself as belonging to the people of Israel out of fear of the reactions of her two guests? Or does she have her own plan, and is she waiting for the right moment in an exercise of "prudential" authority?

The reader must wait patiently for the story to answer her questions, and in the meantime the narrative focuses on Haman, who does not wait and comes to hasty conclusions, having interpreted in a positive way Esther's request: sure, he thinks, and announces to his family and friends, the invitation of the queen addressed only to him and the king is a sign of great respect and honor, and if that Mordecai persists in not wanting to kneel before him, he will get what he deserves: on the advice of his wife and friends, he causes a gallows to be prepared on which the insolent rebel might be hanged, so that he might go "merrily with the king to the dinner" (5:14). Power makes men cruel; Haman wants the extermination of all the Jews and also wants to anticipate the death of Mordecai, on the gallows prepared for him.

But God's plans are different: Ahasuerus that night, sleepless, asks to be read again the chronicles of the kingdom. And in them, it is reported that Mordecai foiled the plot against the king, who then decides to pay tribute to the one who saved his life, the very Mordecai, who, unbeknownst to the king, has already had a gallows of death prepared for him. The biblical message is comforting: good that is done, sooner or later, becomes salvation for self and others.

And indeed, Ahasuerus seeks the counsel of Haman, who in the meantime had come to court, on what should be done to a man to whom the king wishes to honor. Haman does not know (but the reader does) that the man whom the king is referring to is Mordecai, and thinks that he is the one whom the king wishes to honor. Moreover, on two occasions he has been privileged guest at the feast of the queen and so now expects further manifestations of favor. Thus, responding to Ahasuerus, he articulates his dream of triumph: wearing a royal robe, and with a crown on his head, being processed on a royal horse through the streets of the city while before him a shout goes up: "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor" (cf. 6:7-

10). Power not only makes men cruel, but also a bit stupid: to concentrate one's desire for power and self-realization in the fact of being carried around dressed as a king is disconcerting folly. The story is ironic, even caricatured, and even more so when what the reader already knew is revealed to Haman: the whole exhibition of pomp and glory is for Mordecai, not for Haman. He had come to the palace to ask the king to hang Mordecai, and instead now it is he who must bear in triumph the one who was supposed to have been his victim.

Then, during the second banquet willed by Esther, when she denounces Haman's evil plan to exterminate all the Jews, it is the end for the persecutor (cf. 7:1-6). The king is incensed, goes out into the garden, and Haman, terrified and aware that his downfall is now certain, begs and begs the queen Esther for mercy, allowing himself to fall on the couch on which she is sitting. But his gesture is misunderstood; power makes men unable to humble themselves, and when the powerful and proud Haman asks for grace and prostrates himself, it appears as an act of violence. The king, returning to the room, sees him and screams, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" (7:8).

For Haman it is the time of reckoning: the gallows which was to have served for the death of Mordecai is instead destined for him. Now, the plot of the story goes to the expected conclusion: the extermination decree is revoked, the people of Israel is saved and the attackers are annihilated. The feast of Purim will serve to remind, from generation to generation, Israel of the salvation wrought by the Lord in a game of masks and role reversal, in which the persecutors are defeated and those who were sentenced to death can celebrate the restoration of life.

"He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away", as the little Virgin of Nazareth will sing in the Magnificat (Lk 1:52 to 53, cf. Also 1 Samuel 2:4-8), celebrating the reversal of fortunes so typical of divine interventions of salvation.

Thus Esther, a queen marked by a radical weakness which was nonetheless turned into overwhelming force in her decision to lay down her life for her people, comes to serve as an exemplary figure of authority that is exercised in full service. An authority that is not the power of the leaders of the nations that dominate and oppress, according to the Gospel words quoted at the beginning of this paper. True authority is service exercised in meekness, humility, love that leads to self-giving. True authority is that of the Lord and Master who became a servant, washing the disciples' feet and so signifying the gift of his life (cf. Jn 13:1-17); true power is that of the "Good Shepherd" who offers the life for the flock that was entrusted to him (cf. Jn 10:11-18).

This is "the service of authority" which is asked of you. Because the rulers of the nations govern according to another logic of power, but "among you it must not be so."